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Features

The MDb Interviews Dan Owsen

by TJ Rappel
1998

Dan Owsen at Nintendo of America is probably best known for his "Ask Dan" Q&A feature on NOA's website. But what you might not realize is that answering questions from loyal Nintendophiles is only one part of Dan's job at NOA. You've read Dan's words in the dialog for such games as Legend of Zelda: Link to the Past and StarFox, as well as heard his voice at the beginning of Super Metroid -- yep, that's Mr. Owsen saying "The last metroid is in captivity...the galaxy is at peace." I managed to get ahold of Dan and he agreed to let me do the ultimate "Ask Dan" -- an exclusive interview for the Metroid Database! He took time out of his busy schedule to answer a bunch of questions from a Metroid-obsessed freak about everything from the Secret Worlds to the current whereabouts of Kid Icarus.

Mr. Owsen responded thusly...

MDb: Tell us what you do at NOA? I usually see your name in the "thanks" list in the ending credits of Nintendo games, but they never say what they're thanking you for. ^_ ^

Dan: I've done a lot of different things here at NOA (I've been here for over 10 years). I started in Consumer Service, answering phone calls and letters during the glory days of the NES. I then moved over to Nintendo Power magazine as a writer / editor. It was during that job that I got the chance to work on the screen text for Zelda: Link to the Past. After spending a month in Japan working on that game, I moved into Nintendo's product development area. In that department I was responsible for localizing many games, that means writing the screen text, manual, internal product briefings, etc. That's what I was doing for most of the games where I got a "THANKS" credit. It was also around this time that I actually lived in Japan for three months and worked with Mr. Miyamoto's group on SNES Star Fox. When the Treehouse first started, I was one of the original people in there. I worked as product manager for many of the initial Rare games, like Donkey Kong Country, etc. In that capacity I was also responsible for manuals, packaging, marketing briefings and even NOA testing coordination. Things came full circle when I moved back into the Publications group and started working on Nintendo's web site. I've been doing that for a few years now and it's been great. I think our web site has come a long way, and it continues to grow at a staggering pace.

What has been your involvement with the Metroid series, besides that spoken bit at the beginning of Super Metroid?

Dan: I actually haven't worked on too many of the Metroid games. I am good friends with Mr. Sakamoto, who was the Producer or Director of SNES Metroid. I happened to be in Japan while they were working on that game, so I recorded the voice sample, and I also played around with the game while it was being developed. I gave them a few comments, mostly difficulty balancing things, but my actual contribution to the game play was not much. By time I saw the game it was pretty far along.

How'd you get that "Last metroid in captivity" gig, by the way?

Dan: I was in the right place at the right time. I also have a lot of friends in R&D 1 who I hung out with while I was working with Mr. Miyamoto's group. As I mentioned, Mr. Sakamoto asked me to do it and the rest is history.

There seems to be a misconception that the Japanese don't much care for the Metroid series in general, while it's my understanding that it was just the original game that wasn't overly popular because it was released for the Famicom Disk System. I've talked to some Japanese gamers, though, who say that the Metroid games are some of their favorites. Plus, given the Metroid references in such games as Kirby SuperStars and Galactic Pinball, and the release of the "Super Metroid: Sound In Action" soundtrack CD, it would seem it's actually quite well-liked over there. Could you help set the record straight on just how popular the Metroid series is in Japan? Do you have any idea why Nintendo wouldn't have re-released Metroid on a Famicom cartridge, the way [they did with Legend of Zelda]?

Dan: I don't know about the exact sales numbers in Japan, but I don't think any of the Metroid games have been huge sales successes there. (I remember seeing the game for something like 1,000 yen--\$10.00-- one time when I was over there.) Of course the Metroid series has its band of otaku followers, but it has never been as successful as Mario or even Zelda as far as I know. One explanation is that the average Japanese gamer doesn't care for the dark mood and ambiance of the game (at least at the time it was released, obviously the tastes are changing over there now). Of course, the Metroid characters are well-liked by the guys at Nintendo in Japan, so that is why they occasionally appear in other games. As for the soundtrack CD, it seems like they make game music CDs for just about every game that ever comes out in Japan, not just the most popular ones.

If I'm not mistaken, you're a huge Metroid fan. But sometimes it seems like Nintendo forgets all about Metroid unless there's a new game around the corner. How popular is Metroid around Nintendo itself? It's gotta be considered a major title for them.

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BONUS QUESTIONS

These are just a few questions I wanted to ask Dan for fun. Ya know, to see if he'd "play ball," as they say in the bidniss. Luckily, he did!

Who would be your choice to play Samus in a Metroid movie?

It would have to be someone really buff. I think Linda Hamilton would be good, but I envision Samus as being a little younger than her. How about Catherine Zeta-Jones (from Mask of Zorro)?

How fast do you think Sam could whip Lara Croft's butt in a fight? No armor, no guns, no little round sunglasses.

Well even if you took away Samus' armor, she's obviously got some cyborg enhancements, so I don't think it would take more than a few nano-seconds for her to reduce Lara to a lifeless, bloody pulp.

Can I be on the Metroid64 development team? The fans'll back me up, man. At least make me a consultant or something. I know enough Japanese to get by. I'm a professional graphic designer, lemme do the package. C'mon...got anything I can do? ;P

I don't know-- the guys in Japan are pretty protective of their characters....

My Super Metroid S-logo baseball cap is falling apart. I've had it for four years. You guys got any more of those left lying around somewhere?

Don't think so. It's a collector's item!

What are those Zeebetite thingies filled with? Is it, like, strawberry jam, or...?

I think they're actually filled with Zeebetite, which at first glance appears to be strawberry jam but is actually more like raspberry jam.

The Metroid games actually take place very near each other chronologically. Explain, in 10 words or less, Kraid's phenomenal growth spurt in that short period of time. (Does

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Dan: Everyone here at NOA LOVES Metroid! I remember using the old NES Player's Guide (with the black cover) while I was on the phones trying to get through the game. As far as I know, the guys at NCL like Metroid too. However, the economic realities sometimes give other games priority over development of a Metroid game.

it have anything to do with the strawberry jam in the Zeebetites?)

Metroid and Zelda are kind of known for being the "darker, more mature" series in Nintendo's lineup. Unfortunately, despite the presence of games like Killer Instinct and Mortal Kombat, the N64 is often perceived as being a "kids' system," full of games like Banjo-Kazooie and Mario64, while PlayStation owners are getting titles like Resident Evil, Metal Gear Solid and Final Fantasy. Do you think Nintendo can regain that adult, hardcore-gamer demographic by the time a new Metroid title would come out? Do you see Zelda: Ocarina of Time as the first step toward that end?

He lost his supply of Slimfast when the first planet blew up.

What's your favorite Metroid website with the initials "MDb?"

Metroid Database? Is there any other choice?

Indeed...is there any other choice? We think not. Thanks Dan!!

Dan: I really don't know why everyone seems to think that the N64 is a kiddie system! It really bugs me. Part of this is because the mindless drones out there who think that unless a game has cursing and vats of blood and gore, it's for kids. This is ridiculous. The only Nintendo produced game in recent memory that was actually intentionally aimed at young kids was Yoshi's Story. I would say games like Banjo-Kazooie and Super Mario 64 are aimed at all ages, and that is going to be true of Zelda 64 too. That being said, we have been successful with games that are specifically aimed at an older audience, like Goldeneye 007, so I think we'll see more of those kinds of games from Nintendo and Rare in the future. Plus, many third parties are developing games for this audience. Turok 2: Seeds of Evil from Acclaim, Nightmare Creatures, Castlevania 64, all look like they'll contain plenty of gore and bloodshed for the mature player.

Do YOU know whatever happened to Hip Tanaka, the composer of the music for the original Metroid and Kid Icarus? I've been wondering that for about ten years, now.

Dan: He is still alive and well. He was heavily involved in the development of Game Boy Camera.

For that matter, whatever happened to Kid Icarus? A KI game for the SNES would've been one of the most beautiful things ever. Has Nintendo forgotten our little winged buddy?

Dan: I'm afraid so... Everyone here at NOA (and probably NCL) loves Kid Icarus, but again the numbers aren't causing the sales department to clamor for a follow-up. Doesn't mean one won't happen in the future, though.

I hear the upcoming color version of Zelda: Link's Awakening for the GameBoy Color will have some new areas added. Will the color re-release of Metroid II have anything new? Also, I know some NES classics are being issued for the GBC--any chance of the original Metroid showing up on the small screen?

Dan: Well, since R&D 1 was involved in the development of Game Boy color, I think they were able to put a special "Metroid palette" in the GBC hardware. This makes Metroid II look really, really nice on Game Boy Color. In fact, it looks a lot like the NES game on GBC. I haven't heard about any plans to produce the original for GBC, though I've heard that it isn't too tough to convert NES games to Game Boy Color. Of course that's easy for me to say since I don't have to do the programming!

How well did you know Metroid producer and Game & Watch/GameBoy/VirtualBoy creator Gumppei Yokoi? What can you tell us about him?

Dan: Mr. Yokoi was always very gracious and kind. I didn't really know him that well, though I did meet him a few times. He was a game player so I'm sure he had involvement in the development of all the games from R&D 1.

Can you tell us anything about Metroid series director Makoto Kanoh, or anyone else who worked on all three Metroid titles?

Dan: Mr. Kanoh has been at Nintendo forever and has been involved with many of R&D 1's projects. I don't know the details of all the staff members involvement with the various software titles from R&D 1. Mr. Sakamoto is probably my best friend in R&D 1. He worked on SNES Metroid and a great game that was never released in the US for Game Boy called Lunar Chase (or X in Japan). He's currently working on new software for Game Boy color, as is most of R&D 1 at this point. The current manager of R&D 1, Mr. Izushi, is also a good friend of many people here at NOA.

2D is far from dead, but a lot of developers feel that since the trend is in 3D polygons, that's how all new games should be. Games like Castlevania: Symphony of the Night (which I think was the greatest game released last year) show that 2D is still more than perfect for some titles. How would YOU personally like to see an N64 Metroid game made--in 2D or 3D? Where would you like to see the story go--resurrection of the Metroids, or a new foe for Samus to face?

Dan: Hm, difficult question. I think Samus would make a killer 3D model. Actually, after you play Zelda 64, you might get a good feeling of what a 3D Metroid would be like. The reason I say that is, in some of the levels you feel like you are inside of a giant puzzle. Also, in Zelda there are many areas that you can see but not get to early in the game. You have to come back to them later, when you have new powers or items. This is a classic element from Metroid, too. Finally, I think Zelda 64 will show how cool some of the big enemy bosses can be in 3D. So I would have to say I would like to see a new Metroid in 3D rather than 2D. That's not to dis 2D, though. I love the new Star Soldier game from Electro Brain / Hudson, and it's just a vertically scrolling shooter. I would love to see a new Metroid game explore more of the universe of Samus Aran (I actually wrote a story for a new Metroid game just for fun one time) but I think it would have to include Metroids!

One of the MDb's visitors' favorite pastimes is messing around with those so-called "secret worlds" in the original Metroid--they've even discovered some in Metroid II. I know Nintendo has acknowledged them, way back in the "Fun Club News" days--in fact, I believe that was where they were first revealed, along with the "stuck-in-the-door-jump" trick. Can you finally settle the argument over whether those areas are just glitches or intentional?

Dan: Well, without asking the programmers or designers, I'd have to say that most of these things are glitches that fortunately worked out to be cool. There are obviously intentional secrets in Metroid, though. I mean the revelation that Samus was actually a woman was probably one of the most surprising video game endings ever at the time.

Finally, Dan, spill what you can tell us about the possibility of a Metroid64.

Dan: Obviously, the guys who worked on the Metroid series are still working for Nintendo in Japan. They love the characters. Many people here at NOA love Metroid (besides me, I know Ken Lobb is a huge Metroid fan, along with probably everyone in the Treehouse, our testing groups and the Nintendo Power staff). So "the love" is there.

I think what it will really take to get a Metroid game off the ground will be some technology or programming discovery for the N64 that would allow for an innovative game play mechanism that can be fit in to the Metroid universe. Beyond all the economic considerations that are always there, I think it just has to make sense, from a game play standpoint, to create a Metroid game. I don't think the developers in Japan just want to make it for the sake of making it. Does that make sense?

Dan, thanks so much for taking the time to answer this. The MDb visitors and I very much appreciate it. The parting words of the interview are yours...

Dan: We lied once about the last Metroid being in captivity and the galaxy being at peace, so who knows what will happen with the

Metroids in the future?! ;-)



TOP

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